

Representative Urban, Senator Bartolomeo, and Members of the Children's Committee, thank you for this opportunity to speak before you. I am here in support of H.B. 5140 An Act Concerning the Use of Therapy Animals to Comfort Children Testifying in Certain Criminal Prosecutions. My name is Lauren Crowley and I am a licensed clinical social worker. I work at the Pulaski Middle School - School Based Health Center in New Britain, sponsored by the Community Health Center, Inc. At school, I am known as "the lady with the dogs". I have 2 registered therapy dogs, Cooper and Barkley. They are both black labs, ages 8 and 2. They are staff members at Community Health Center and the Consolidated School District of New Britain, and have staff ID badges. Cooper's badge enables him to get into school. They are great co-workers and therapy partners.

On a volunteer basis, I am a member of Tails of Joy's Animal Assisted Crisis Response Team. Over the years, my dogs and I have visited Newtown, Jonathan Law, and recently Chamberlain Elementary School in New Britain after a student died in a house fire. I have witnessed the calming effect my dogs have on children, teens, and families who are struggling with losses.

Today I am here to represent the clients I have worked with who have experienced trauma. Over the past 8 years in my work at School Based Health Centers in New Britain middle schools, I have worked with many clients who have been sexually abused and have experienced other types of abuse. Most of the time, this abuser was a family friend, a parent, a grandparent, a significant other of a parent, or someone else that the child or teen knew and trusted. The abuse took place for some in elementary school and for others while in middle school. Some clients told an adult shortly after it happened; others kept this secret to themselves for years. They have all struggled emotionally from this abuse. I learned a great deal working with these clients. I saw how brave they are for letting an adult know and also how resilient they are in dealing with trauma. I am here advocating for them, to let you know how difficult this is for them, but also how my therapy dogs have helped them.

The process of letting an adult know about abuse must be overwhelming, but these kids were brave enough to tell someone. This is only the beginning. Next they must talk to the police, many different agencies, have physical exams and tests, and go through various parts of the legal process. This would be overwhelming for an adult, and probably more so for a preteen or teen. This process can be violating and cause them to relive the trauma.

If Cooper and Barkley could talk, they would tell you that they have heard clients talk about many types of abuse. They have also heard clients talk about their worries, nightmares, flashbacks, sleeping and eating issues, cutting and other self-harming behaviors, suicidal thoughts, feeling unsafe, and other struggles. During sessions, Cooper and Barkley have been able to help them relax and feel less stressed. During sessions, we have talked about how dogs show stress, along with ways to help dogs when they are stressed. We also talked about what it would be like to have a forensic interview or other meetings and appointments. When I asked my clients if they feel it would have been helpful to have Cooper or Barkley with them at these meetings, they all said yes, that they would have been more relaxed. One client told me after her interview that "the dog would be helpful because I was nervous at the interview. I would be more relaxed if I had a dog with me".

Please consider passing H.B. 5140. Research has shown that dogs help to reduce stress levels and provide comfort. Children who have been mistreated and/or neglected need a great deal of

support after these traumas. Therapy dogs can help children cope with stressors and trauma. Having a furry friend and seeing a wagging tail by their side does a great deal to put a child at ease. These children have been hurt by someone who is often older, bigger, and stronger; deserve support during a criminal investigation to hold this person accountable. I want these children to feel empowered and resilient, **not** victims. It has been a goal of mine to have therapy animals support children who are testifying in court. Cooper, Barkley, my clients, and I thank you for the work you do to help the children of Connecticut and look forward to the day that therapy animals are allowed to comfort children in court.

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